

# Introduction

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The history of Europe in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages **is** the history of conversion to Christianity. The phenomenon of conversion, in one way or another, forms part of all the major themes that have come to define that transformative era. It is present in the creation of power centres, in the identity formation of successor kingdoms, in political conquest and submission, in defining freedom and servitude, in the creation of holy men and women, in the suppression of heresy, in acts of penance, in educational programmes and intellectual life more generally, in social organization and hierarchy, and even in changing patterns of landholding. Conversion permeates everything to such a degree that it has maintained its relevance continuously to the present day, thereby affording us a comparative measure of social and religious change over time, but also a ‘live’ link that enables a conversation between the present and the past.<sup>1</sup>

This volume is the first of two interlinked volumes to emanate from the activities of the research network ‘Converting the Isles’, devoted to investigating this central phenomenon in a region that we have defined for the purpose of our research as ‘the Isles’, or the insular world. It consists of Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and the non-English-speaking territories roughly coterminous with present-day Wales and Scotland, Scandinavia and Iceland. For students of early medieval Europe in general, conversion to Christianity will be familiar mainly through the prevalent grand narrative of the conversion of the Roman Empire and, after the demise of the Empire in the West, the subsequent conversion of various Germanic peoples through missionary expeditions, usually stimulated by Frankish political expansion. Britain is unique for being both within and without this narrative because of Roman occupation followed by Anglo-Saxon settlement. But the other regions covered by the network were almost entirely untouched by it. We have chosen to focus our research on these areas precisely because they offer an alternative to the familiar paradigm of the missionary-led conversion enterprise.<sup>2</sup> It is not our aim, however, to offer a cogent counter-narrative. Rather, we wish to highlight the multivalence of the phenomenon called ‘conversion’ and show how an informed scholarly dialogue can ultimately consolidate the different strands of the historiography concerned with this movement in Europe.

The tools that were available to us for this task were comparative history, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. The heuristic of comparative history is explored in depth by Chris Wickham at the outset of the volume. The comparison is between regions that constitute the insular world as defined above but, just as importantly, also with Continental Europe (and occasionally beyond). The interdisciplinary thrust of our work involves history, archaeology, literary studies, linguistics, art history, and anthropology. Since research in each of these disciplines is, of necessity, specialized, collaborative work is essential in bridging the

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<sup>1</sup> We are very grateful to Nancy Edwards (our co-editor on *Transforming Landscapes in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond: Converting the Isles II*) for her comments on a draft of this Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> A recent caveat against exaggerating the role of missions and ‘figures of authority’ in the conversion of Scandinavia at the expense of addressing conversion as ‘a broader socio-cultural process’ is made in an essay by Garipzanov, ‘Christian Identities, Social Status, and Gender in Viking-Age Scandinavia’, p. 139.

gaps between them and enabling a meaningful and productive conversation. It was precisely this type of interdisciplinary dialogue we sought to create in the conferences, workshops, and lectures organized by the network.<sup>3</sup> It facilitated discussion across geographical and disciplinary boundaries and opened up new research avenues. The efficacy of this approach — combining the comparative, the interdisciplinary, and the collaborative — comes into full view when both volumes of *Converting the Isles* are considered together.

The rationale for new research in each of the regions considered by the network is discussed separately in the historiographical contributions in Part I of the present volume.<sup>4</sup> It will be useful, however, to offer some brief, introductory observations on the study of early medieval conversion in Europe more generally. In many ways the study of conversion in western Europe has been very much the study of the conversion of Germanic Europe. This seems to have come about because research into conversion has traditionally concentrated on the interface between missions and politics, which before c. 1000 is for the most part the preserve of Francia and the Germanic parts of Europe which came under Frankish hegemony, including the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent. Scandinavia was largely excluded from this narrative, and its people were only given a part to play in it as Viking settlers who accepted baptism at the hands of Frankish or English kings to whom they submitted. Although nowadays the focus of attention is no longer exclusively on politics and missions, the geographical and ethnic spotlight has been slow to shift. When it has moved, Scandinavia and central Europe have enjoyed more integration into the historiography than the Celtic-speaking areas of Europe in book-length studies or edited volumes from the last two decades devoted to conversion.<sup>5</sup>

Thematically, perhaps the biggest change in conversion studies has been that the teleological paradigm of ‘progress’ or ‘transition’ (the latter being an ostensibly more benign term) no longer prevails in the story of the introduction of Christianity. It is now recognized that in the Middle Ages paganism was not eradicated quickly, and in some places not at all: pagans continued to live in close proximity to Christians for a considerable period, and ‘pagan’ practices could persist in Christian communities, though some of these would be rebranded ‘magic’ or ‘superstition’, thereby making them appear less- or non-religious and as such not meriting of religious condemnation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many of the changes once attributed specifically to conversion form part of a wider nexus of social evolution and cultural exchange in which Christianity plays only one of many interconnecting roles.<sup>7</sup> Even the case of writing linked inextricably with Christianity, ‘the religion of the book’, is not always clear-cut. While literacy and Christianity went hand in hand and thus widespread textual production was the direct result of the introduction of the new religion, the cultivation of specific types of texts may be associated with the process of Christianization itself, laws being a prominent

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<sup>3</sup> These are listed, p. 0 above.

<sup>4</sup> Scotland is considered more fully in this regard in volume II; Professor Thomas Clancy gave a lecture on the Church in Scotland at ‘Pagan and Christian’, the first conference hosted by ‘Converting the Isles’, 23–24 September 2011. An audio podcast is available on the Network’s website: <<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/conversion/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*; Wood, *The Missionary Life*; Carver, *The Cross Goes North*; Berend, *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*.

<sup>6</sup> Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*; Wood, ‘Pagan Religion and Superstition’; Wood, ‘The Pagans and the Other’; Hen, ‘The Early Medieval West’.

<sup>7</sup> A point recently reinforced by Garipzanov, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

example.<sup>8</sup> Far from being linear, developments associated with conversion are interwoven with other social and political strands, according the movement a specific local hue.

The importance of local context to the process of conversion has also received greater emphasis in recent scholarship. The broad outline of the Christian paradigm may be readily identifiable across a large swathe of western Europe, including the insular world. It acquired meaning, however, only through engagement and negotiation within a specific space and time. Comparative analysis has involved taking account of the local circumstances that provide Christianities with their distinctive contours.<sup>9</sup> To return again to the example of Latin literacy, conversion assured its introduction, yet the directions it subsequently took were manifold. Writing in the vernacular acquired a pivotal position in areas of the insular world in ways it could not in Francia where Late Latin and Romance were two sides of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> Yet its evolution was far from uniform in these regions.<sup>11</sup> Early appearance of a self-confident, diverse written literature in Irish was the result of a vigorous, highly productive encounter with Latin in the far west. In Iceland too at a later date, but a broadly similar stage developmentally as far as the introduction of Christianity is concerned, the vernacular was cultivated as a vehicle for expression of several contrasting genres.<sup>12</sup> The legacy of Roman Britain ensured that the relationship between Latin and Old English, as well as Welsh, was more complex, though the former in particular emerged as a sophisticated form of expression at a relatively early stage and one intimately associated with Christianity as Bede's story of Cædmon, cowherd at the abbey of Whitby, makes clear.<sup>13</sup> The paucity of comparable literary evidence from Scotland is also explicable in terms of local conditions.<sup>14</sup> The global tool of writing, therefore, can only be evaluated in regional terms.

It was the access provided by literacy to the wider world of Christian thought and education that proved truly transformative, as scholarship has stressed.<sup>15</sup> Intensive study of the Bible and knowledge of classical culture that being part of the intellectual Christian family ensured led to self-reflection and the creation of new cultural identities.<sup>16</sup> As a defining historical moment, conversion shaped narratives designed to situate communities within Christendom as a whole. As far as the Icelandic version of this myth is concerned, as recounted in *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of the Icelanders*), the population embraced the new religion willingly and of one accord.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, the reality was very different, and in

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<sup>8</sup> See Berend, 'Introduction', pp. 29–30.

<sup>9</sup> Regional patterns are given due recognition in the individual chapters in Berend, *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*, facilitating the identification of real similarities and differences in the interrelationship between religious and political change in the various polities under discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Focusing on how Late Latin texts were read, Roger Wright suggested that the lack of clear distinction between the two could extend to written texts as well: *Late Latin and Early Romance*, pp. 105–18. See also Adams, 'Late Latin'.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the essays in Clunies Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*.

<sup>13</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV, 24, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 414–20.

<sup>14</sup> For Scotland and the other Celtic-speaking regions, see the essays in Pryce, *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Stevenson, 'Literacy and Orality in Early Medieval Ireland', p. 14, and the essays in McKitterick, *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* and Reynolds, *Medieval Reading*; Riché, *Education and Culture*, also remains useful.

<sup>17</sup> *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson.

Iceland, as elsewhere, the dynamic of power relations between chieftains and the Church was central to the introduction of Christianity, as Orri Vésteinsson has shown.<sup>18</sup>

In Orri Vésteinsson's study of the Icelandic situation, the later written material is re-evaluated in the light of significant new archaeological finds. The material culture of pre-Christian religion and of conversion in Europe has also been the subject of major revision.<sup>19</sup> Progress in the archaeology of Ireland, Scandinavia, Iceland, and Britain (including Roman, British, Anglo-Saxon, and Pictish finds) has led the way in this area, and this is discussed further in Part I.<sup>20</sup> Advances have involved debunking truisms associated with the interpretation of changing burial practices (e.g. the realization that decrease or disappearance of burial goods or family cemeteries is not necessarily the result of conversion), paying more attention to the contribution of social-scientific discourses to understanding ritual practices, adopting new perspectives in the study of places of cult in the landscape, reconsidering the evidence for Germanic shrines or the non-evidence for Germanic temples, and reassessing the correspondence between written evidence and material finds. As far as the written evidence is concerned, it is now widely acknowledged that Christian ideology shaped textual depictions of an allegedly pagan past. Credence cannot be placed in accounts of pre-Christian practices and beliefs cast in clerical ink.

A further significant change in historiography has been the introduction of cross-disciplinary analysis, but this has taken place sporadically, with isolated attempts made independently by individual scholars for the most part. Some have taken advantage of more recent developments in social scientific studies of religion or in the somewhat controversial field of cognitive religion (as exemplified by the theorist Pascal Boyer and the cognitive anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse), while others have continued to draw on central but vintage anthropological studies, especially by Africanists.<sup>21</sup> Among the most popular have been the influential works of Robin Horton.<sup>22</sup> However, given the intermittent nature of the attempts at working with theoretical models or with examples from other disciplines, no coherent interdisciplinary discourse has yet emerged which addresses the unique methodological challenges posed by approaches of this kind.<sup>23</sup> One of the aims of 'Converting the Isles' was to facilitate such a discourse by inviting anthropologists, medieval historians, and literary scholars, among others, to explore the mutual benefits of dialogue and to discuss

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<sup>18</sup> Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Halsall, 'Examining the Christianization of the Region of Metz from Archaeological Sources'; Clay, *In the Shadow of Death*; Petts, *Pagan and Christian*.

<sup>20</sup> Some sample publications are Rahtz and others, *Canington Cemetery*; Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*; Hadley, 'Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism?'; Brink, 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?'; O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian?'; Driscoll and others, *Pictish Progress*; Pluskowski, 'The Archaeology of Paganism'; Nordeide, *The Viking Age as a Period of Religious Transformation*.

<sup>21</sup> For examples of medievalists attempting to work with modern theoretical discourses, see Higham, *The Convert Kings*; Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*; Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*; Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*; Garipzanov, 'Christian Identities, Social Status, and Gender in Viking-Age Scandinavia'. Some of the better known publications by the theorists mentioned above are Boyer, *Religion Explained* and Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.

<sup>22</sup> For the use of Horton's work in early medieval studies, see, for example, Martin, 'African Conversion and the Irish Question'; Higham, *The Convert Kings*, especially pp. 20–28; Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*; Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*. For some of his best known work, see Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*.

<sup>23</sup> Dr Nora Berend and Dr Haki Antonsson discussed issues pertaining to use of methods from the social sciences in particular to evaluate conversion in the medieval period, at the first conference hosted by 'Converting the Isles' ('Pagan and Christian', 23–24 September 2011): a podcast is available on the website: <<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/conversion/>>.

ways of bridging the dreaded gap between modern scientific methods and the medieval evidence which may appear idiosyncratic from a modern perspective. Examples of the directions that this dialogue can take are Wickham's comparative observations on anthropological studies and Tomas Sundnes Drønen's chapter reflecting aspects of his work among the Dii of Cameroon.<sup>24</sup>

By identifying lacunae in the existing historiography of European conversion and by drawing on the existing strengths of scholarship of the insular world, we set out to establish our own research agenda. The first step was to take a fresh look at missionary history, a topic discussed in Part II of this volume which explores how influential missions were in comparison with other conversion processes and what the practicalities of them were. It asks what we should make of literary accounts of missions and whether there are parallels in the modern era that can serve as a useful comparison.

Part III explores the way in which contemporaries perceived religious conversion, and how modern-day scholars might best frame it with the benefit of hindsight. When is it appropriate to view religious change as conversion, when as assimilation, when as syncretism, and when is it perhaps only an illusion, involving no change at all? This section addresses pre-Christian religions, investigating how contemporaries portrayed them. Did they describe paganism under the veil of Christian bias, and was there a moral paradigm of good versus evil? Were they influenced by the classical principle of *interpretatio Romana*, or were they describing what they knew from their own experience?

An important consequence of the focus of our research on the insular world was the acknowledgement that, with the exception of Anglo-Saxon England, missionary and political agency appears not to have been as significant there as elsewhere in Europe. It is certainly less in evidence in contemporary insular sources than it is, for example, in Continental hagiography. As a result, almost by default, we had to look beyond politics and missions and examine other conversion processes and their consequences. What is at issue are mainly long-term conversion processes that come into sharp focus in their social, cultural, and economic aspects. Unlike missionary tales, such aspects very rarely lend themselves to neat narratives, and for this reason perhaps, they have often been neglected in previous scholarship. In Part IV, therefore, the spotlight is turned onto social and economic stimulants for conversion, as well as towards the socio-economic implications of religious change. Missionary agency, or any other kind of agency, is no longer to the fore. What is interrogated in their stead are the economic motivations and benefits of conversion and the types of evidence, both textual and material, that can reveal them. The central issues are whether Christianity can be said to have suited or favoured any kind of economic regime in particular, and whether there is clear evidence for a causal connection between religious ideology and social or economic change.

Finally, in Part V, the book examines that quintessential creation of Christian popular culture: the saint and his or her hagiography. We look especially at missionary saints, or saints who were allegedly active during periods of religious change, and at the social contexts in which their hagiography was written. This facilitates an examination of the differences in the construction of missionary saints in, for example, Scandinavia in comparison with Wales. What can these differences tell us about correspondences between Christian ideals and contemporary cultures? What can the saint's *Life* tell us about the very notion of Christian ideals and the values they were meant to inculcate in society? And no less important, what

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<sup>24</sup> Professor Joel Robbins also gave a talk on 'Anthropology and the Study of Christianity' in February 2014 under the auspices of 'Converting the Isles'; a podcast can be accessed via the network's website: <<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/conversion/>>.

does it reveal about the type of Christian society the hagiographer was seeking to promote through analogy with the society that the saint was made to create in the text?

Volume II, *Transforming Landscapes in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond*, extends our discussion of many of these themes but with a greater emphasis on the landscape of religion and material culture. It also explores the special relationship between Christianity and literacy and learning noted above. Its conclusion reflects on the sum of contributions in both volumes, while also looking forward to further research. In tandem, both volumes present what we suggest is a more nuanced interpretation of the introduction of Christianity into the early medieval insular world, underlining the sheer diversity and complexity of the process of conversion therein. In turning a spotlight on a particular corner of north-western Europe and in harnessing evidence from a variety of disciplines to illuminate it, we present a refined narrative of Converting the Isles.



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